

## **Council Learns about Coordinated Planning in the Central Valley**

*by: Mike Chapel*

The Council met in Merced on April 5-6, 2006 to discuss coordinated conservation and planning in the Central valley. A field tour to the Grasslands on April 5 highlighted the close coordination among private landowners and all levels of government to conserve the largest remaining wetlands complex in the state. The meeting on April 6 was organized as a series of panels that provided the Council with an overview of the conservation setting in the Central Valley, some innovative agency cooperation with regional growth management, and some new opportunities for agency coordination in natural resource conservation.

### **The Conservation Setting in the Central Valley**

Dr. Michael Teitz (Public Policy Institute) opened this discussion by explaining that the human population in the Central Valley is projected to increase from 3 – 7 million over the next 40 years. Considerable attendant impacts to air quality, water, and habitats are forecast. The key question facing the region today is how to channel growth in ways that are environmentally responsible.

Carl Whiteside (Great Valley Center) described the historic development and population growth patterns in the Valley. She explained the central role of agriculture in the development and economy of the region. Ms. Whiteside noted that the population in the Central Valley has double every 30 years since 1900 and the region is now growing faster than Mexico. Most of the recent and projected population growth in the Valley is a result of foreign immigration. Low wages, rising home costs, and other factors are now contributing to increasing poverty. Environmental degradation is also a growing challenge. Ms. Whiteside stressed that the Central Valley could soon become an economic burden to the state and nation without timely investments in the infrastructure to address the projected social, economic and environmental trends. She described a new initiative – The San Joaquin Valley Partnership – that was recently formed under state leadership to address these concerns.

### **Agency Cooperation – Regional Growth Management**

Joan Sullenberger (California Business, Housing, and Transportation Agency) opening this panel by describing the new Blue Print Planning Program. This program has been organized to develop growth-management strategies for sub-regions of the state. The University of California is providing decision-support services for community-based working groups of citizens and government within the sub-regions. Merced County was cited as an example of a pilot project which led to a regional transportation plan that has broad support within the community and local agencies.

Next, Linda Budge (City Council of Rancho Cordova) described another example of a regional planning under the Blue Print Planning Program. She outlined work by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) to coordinate housing and transportation development at the neighborhood, city, and counties scales in the region. This program relied heavily on a series of stakeholder workshops. The products are now being incorporated into local area plans at each of these scales.

Rod Meade (consultant) closed this panel by summarizing some of the initial work to coordinated regional planning across the nine counties in the Central Valley. Mr. Meade explained that the complexities among governments, special interests, and issues at this scale are presenting formidable challenges to regional coordination. He forecast that, although leaders from the region have agreed on a set of nine guiding principles, finding consensus on the many issues in the region will take longer and be more difficult than in the sub-regional efforts that are under way.

### **Agency Coordination – Resources Conservation**

Ruth Coleman (California Department of Parks and Recreation) began this panel by describing the new Central Valley Vision program at DPR. The goal for this program is to provide citizen-driven expansion and management of the state park system in the Valley. The DPR held ten workshops throughout the region. Citizens advised that the top priorities for providing recreation to the growing population in the Valley should be more access to: 1) rivers and lakes; 2) cultural and historic sites; 3) important natural and scenic areas; 4) alternatives to traditional tent camping; and 5) off-highway vehicle facilities. The Department is now drafting a management strategy for the Valley that focuses on these elements. They are also seeking partnerships among the members of the Biodiversity Council as they plan for open space in the region.

Russ Strach (NOAA Fisheries Service) offered some preliminary insight into the new Central Valley Salmon and Steelhead Recovery Program. The program is still in the early stages of development, but the goal will be to recover Chinook and steelhead populations to the San Joaquin River and its tributaries in the region. Members of the CBC will be invited to participate with the recovery effort when details about the program are developed in more detail.

Luree Stetson (Great Places Program) presented a progress report on the Great Places Program. This program has been developed to assist local, state and regional planning in California. The program is designed to improve and integrate natural resource and key planning data. Access to the information is enhanced through an on-line, centralized spatial data system. The program has also established processes for sharing data between local, regional and state entities. Federal agencies were invited to join this program during the meeting.